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# PERPETUAL NOVELTY

Brian Caverly

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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School of The Arts  
Virginia Commonwealth University

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Brian Caverly entitled PERPETUAL NOVELTY has been approved by his or her committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis or dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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May 18, 2004

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PERPETUAL NOVELTY

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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### Acknowledgement

To my family, especially my parents Jim and Jeanne, who have been absolutely supportive of me in every way. To all of my friends. And to the wonderful faculty of the Virginia Commonwealth University Sculpture Department. Thank you all.

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## Abstract

### PERPETUAL NOVELTY

By Brian Caverly, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2004

Major Director: Elizabeth King  
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Within this thesis is a mapping out of the processes, concepts, and influences, behind the sculptural practice of Brian Caverly. From Complex Adaptive Systems to the world of order of Michel Foucault to the reexamination of the Modernist movement by Yve Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, a rhizomatic path of connections and lines form and cross over, weaving together into a swarming mayhem of over population. Out of this chaos and order grow complex installations and constructions that are inherently bound by the system of their making, yet attempt at every turn to escape conformity.

## PERPETUAL NOVELTY

The field of art today is an open arena for conversation and debate, no longer hindered by the isms of the modernist era: there is no unitary art narrative that bounds us to a singular path of investigation. Disciplines of study are becoming increasingly specialized. Simultaneously cross-disciplinary study is becoming more accepted as a means to healthy learning and growth. Multiple lines of thought have been put forth in recent decades by writers, scientists, artists, and philosophers, which have changed the way in which we understand and operate in the rapidly changing world. The rapid development of technology is making things possible that were once never imaginable. We are quickly growing into and surpassing the worlds imagined by science fiction writers. Art is a field where boundaries can easily be traversed. Connections can be made from art to literature to music to religion to science. The imagination is unrestrained by the logistics of utility and functionality. While maintaining a commitment to a physical engagement with real materials and objects, I create metaphors for the myriad overlapping, often times conflicting, systems that control our existence in the world.

I am interested in how artists throughout the last century have used found objects and junk materials to express new ideas. From Jean Tinguely and his self-destructive machines, Robert Rauschenburg and his pop-expressionist assemblages, to Nancy Rubins and her explosively arranged formations of crushed cars, airplanes, and garbage, and Sarah Sze's use of hardware store materials to invent surprisingly complex microcosms, these artists create metaphors for the larger world in which we live. They visually encapsulate



events that are not always attainable by the human eye, and offer us a new perspective on the world in which we are inseparably engaged.

The sculptor Tony Cragg has been committed to expanding the visual language of the world around us. He believes that in this way we can enrich our experiences in the world. He accomplishes this goal through the exploration of materials and forms taken from the natural and industrial world. He creates forms and manipulates materials in unusual ways that disrupt our understanding of their function in society. In the catalogue, *A new thing breathing: recent work by tony cragg*, the artist says, "sculpture, of all the objects and things that human beings deem necessary to make their lives more livable belongs for several reasons in a rare and extraordinary class of its own. Rare, because even just looked at quantitatively, very few kilograms of sculpture are made on an average day, while many billions of tons of materials are made into other more 'useful' things. Extraordinary, because although sculpture remains for the greater part useless, unlike designed objects, it is an attempt to make dumb material express human thoughts and emotions. It is the attempt not just to project intelligence into material but also to use material to think with. Sculptures are often and at their best not just the result of an artist taking a material, for example a piece of stone or a lump of clay, out of its normal environment and forcing it into a form which expresses a preformulated notion, but rather the result of a dialogue between the material and the artist. The material finds itself in new form and the sculptor finds himself with new content and new meaning." (28)

I am interested in exploring how complex systems of growth develop and evolve. What are the processes of order and chaos that emerge from within a given set of limits and operations? How can these phenomena be visually represented in sculptural form?

In *Complexity*, M. Mitchell Waldrop tells the story of the development of Complex Systems Research, which examines how systems in the world, from biologic to economic, grow, adapt, and evolve. Stephan Wolfram, a scientist working on the problem of studying these systems summarizes a point key to understanding complex systems. "You generally find that the basic components and the basic laws are quite simple; the complexity arises because you have a great many of these simple components interacting simultaneously. The complexity is actually in the organization- the myriad possible ways that the components of the system can interact." (Waldrop, 86)

John Holland, a computer scientist interviewed by M Mitchell Waldrop in *Complexity*, has attributed four basic principles to complex adaptive systems: multiple agents, building blocks, internal models, and perpetual novelty. Examples of these systems in the natural world include "brains, immune systems, ecologies, cells, developing embryos, and ant colonies. In the human world they include cultural and social systems such as political parties or scientific communities." (Waldrop, 145) The first principle states that each system "is a network of many agents acting in parallel." (Waldrop, 145) Molecules are the agents of DNA. Citizens are the agents of a society. There are two important aspects of the agents. First, there is no central point of control, and secondly, within a given environment there is a constant interplay between agents; some form of communication. The second principle states, agents that form one layer in a system will

comprise the building blocks for subsequent layers. Building blocks recombine constantly within a given system. This is crucial for a system to adapt to changing environments and scenarios. "A group of proteins, lipids, and nucleic acids will form a cell, a group of cells will form a tissue, a collection of tissues will form an organ, an association of organs will form a whole organism, and a group of organisms will form an ecosystem." (Waldrop, 145) The third point is that "all complex adaptive systems anticipate the future." (Waldrop, 146) These systems have built in, pre-coded, "internal models", which help them to make decisions about their next action. If y happens and you respond with x, than z is the most likely outcome. The internal models are the "building blocks of behavior", and can be rearranged as the system gains intelligence. The fourth principal states, "complex adaptive systems typically have many niches, each one of which can be exploited by an agent adapted to fill that niche." (Waldrop, 147) Within a given system these niches are constantly being filled, and new niches are being opened up. "So new opportunities are always being created by the system. And that, in turn, means that it's essentially meaningless to talk about a complex adaptive system being in equilibrium: the system can never get there. It is always unfolding, always in transition. In fact, if the system ever does reach equilibrium, it isn't just stable, it's dead. And by the same token, there's no point in imagining that the agents in the system can ever 'optimize' their fitness, or their utility, or whatever. The space of possibilities is too vast; they have no practical way of finding the optimum. The most they can ever do is to change and improve themselves relative to what the other agents are doing. In short, complex adaptive systems are characterized by perpetual novelty." (Waldrop, 147)

I have developed a series of site-specific installations and constructions in which I assemble disparate parts into large self-sustaining structures. The base materials, the building blocks that comprise the larger installation/ construction consist of both found materials from the local environment, and handmade components.

Some of the handmade components I make and later bring into context in the larger constructions are wooden carvings that represent a diverse variety of subject matter. There are figurative elements and subjects from the natural environment as well as abstract forms. Among the figurative elements, for example, is a twice life size representation of a toe with a fungus growing out from under the toenail. I find myself modeling natural occurrences where examples of overgrowth and degeneration are present, such as with fungus, tumors, or the scar-growth around cut limbs of a tree.

In *Formless*, the art historians Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss reexamine the modernist tradition and offer up a new reading as an alternative to the strict dogmas defined by such leading art historians as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. The title of the book, *Formless*, is the starting point for Bois and Krauss, who borrow the term from the philosopher George Bataille. Bataille would not define the term: "It is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world. It is not so much a stable motif to which we can refer, a symbolizable theme, a given quality, as it is a form allowing one to operate a declassification, in the double sense lowering and of taxonomic disorder. Nothing in and of itself, the formless has only an operational existence: it is a performative, like obscene words, the violence of which derives less from semantics than from the very act of the delivery. The Formless is an

operation." (Alain-Bois and Krauss, 28) This "slide toward lowness" is also referred to as an operation of slippage, which displaces both the 'form' and 'content' of the work. Bois and Krauss organize the show according to four basic vectors: Horizontality, entropy, base materialism, and pulse. (Alain-Bois and Krauss, 13-40)

Horizontality refers to a "lowering from the vertical to the horizontal." It implies a return to the animal state from which we came, and from which there exists a more carnal connection to the world. Hence, Bataille speaks of "our big toe", the lowest part of the body. Traditionally artwork has been made in reference to our erect posture, from which we view it in a vertical field of vision. This, according to Bois and Krauss, creates a singular connection with the mind, and a disconnect with the carnal. "Even if one no longer speaks of painting as a window opened onto the world, the modernist picture is still conceived as a vertical section that presupposes the viewers' having forgotten that his or her feet are in the dirt." (Alain-Bois and Krauss, 25) By moving his canvases to the floor, Jackson Pollock reorients our perception to the horizontal, and thus creates a slippage back to the low. (Alain-Bois and Krauss, 13-40)

Entropy, an idea central to the practice of Robert Smithson, means "the constant and irreversible degradation of energy in every system, a degradation that lends to a continually increasing state of disorder and of non-differentiation in matter." (Alain-Bois and Krauss, 34) Krauss gives examples of this principle: degradation, redundancy, accumulation-infinite protrusion, inversion, tearing, lack of elasticity, invasion of 'noise' into the message, wear and tear, under usage, non consumption. Along with the asphalt run down work of Smithson, Robert Morris's untitled scatter pieces, and his cut felt works

exemplify this category. Morris formulated a similar concept in regards to his work and coined the term anti-form. (Alain-Bois and Krauss, 34-40)

I deconstruct and manipulate the found materials I use through processes such as breaking, cutting, drilling, smashing, carving, and painting. Then I recombine and attach the fragments to one another by means of a system of ball and socket joints that I have designed and fabricated, which can be easily bolted or cemented to a multiplicity of objects. Thus a paintbrush can snap onto a wooden carved bird attached to a vacuum cleaner stuck to the splintered half of a chair. The ball and socket joints I make at once affix the parts together and simultaneously create a freedom of motion, which makes the structure unwieldy as it increases in size. As I attempt to build, form, and engineer the structure in space, it takes on a life of its own, collapsing under its own sheer mass. Massive agglomerations grow and undulate (often in an unseemly manner) within a given space. The form of the mass often grows in reaction to the specific site. It can cling to the architecture, meander up walls, hang from the ceiling, or slump against a corner.

The properties of both the building blocks and the joints themselves inform the subsequent moves that lead to the end result. Attributes such as the type of material, size, shape, color, associative power, map out the evolution of the sculpture. A process of growth and ordering becomes prevalent and at the same time confusing. In *The Order of Things, An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, Michael Foucault writes, "but no sooner have they been adumbrated than all these groupings dissolve again, for the field of identity that sustains them, however limited it may be, is still too wide not to be unstable; and so the sick mind continues to infinity, creating groups then dispersing them again, heaping up

diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, frenziedly beginning all over again, becoming more and more disturbed, and teetering finally on the brink of anxiety." (xviii)

## Bibliography



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Alain Bois, Yve, and Krauss, Rosalind E. Formless A User's Guide. 1997, New York. Zone Books. (13-40)

A new thing breathing: recent work by tony cragg. (Catalogue). 2000, Tate Gallery Liverpool. (28)

Foucault, Michel. The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences. 1970, Random House. (xviii)

Waldrop, Mitchell M. Complexity: The Emerging Science At The Edge of Order and Chaos. 1992. Touchstone Books. (86, 145-147)

## VITA

### EXHIBITIONS

- 2004 **Madison's Cave**  
Keith Talent Gallery, London  
**MFA Thesis Exhibition**  
Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA  
**Ray Casserole**  
Art Works, Richmond, VA
- 2003 **It Came From The Graduate Studios**  
FAB Gallery, Richmond, VA  
**Trans-Appalachian Tractor Pull 2**  
Future Tenant, Pittsburgh, PA  
**Free Radicals & Concrete Sequentials**  
Orange Door Gallery, Richmond, VA
- 2002 **Subtle Interventions**  
Fayerweather Gallery, Charlottesville, VA
- 2001 **Masque Show**  
Albany Center Galleries, Albany, NY  
**A Retrospective of Exhibitions: 1984-2001**  
Visual Arts Gallery, Glens Falls, NY  
**First Years**  
Visual Arts Gallery, Glens Falls, NY
- 2000 **Artists of the Mohawk Hudson Region Juried Exhibition**  
Curated by Xu Bing, University Art Museum, SUNY Albany  
**Juried Undergraduate Art Exhibition**  
University Art Museum, SUNY Albany
- 1998 **Juried Undergraduate Art Exhibition**  
University Art Museum, SUNY Albany
- 1997 **Juried Art Exhibition**  
Visual Arts Gallery, Adirondack Community College, Glens Falls, NY

### AWARDS

- 2004 **Joan Mitchell Foundation**, Grant for painting and sculpture Nominee  
Commonwealth Award, Virginia Commonwealth University  
International Sculpture Center, Outstanding Student Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Nominee
- 2003 **Dedalus Foundation**, Masters of Fine Arts Fellowship in painting and sculpture Nominee  
International Sculpture Center, Outstanding Student Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Nominee
- 2002 Graduate School Scholarship, Virginia Commonwealth University
- 2000 Albany Center Galleries Juror's Award, Juried Undergraduate Art Exhibition, University Art Museum, SUNY Albany